



If it is to benefit from a high-growth region and prosper among other nations in the world, Sri Lanka must drastically switch its focus away from narrow and claustrophobic identity and tribal battles on-to modern, secular goals related to the prosperity of its people. We are facing a new version of the old guns versus butter debate central to economics. Do we allocate our time, resources and effort toward guns? (meaning, war or conflict) Or are we going to allocate the bulk of them toward the production of "butter?" (meaning, our material sustenance)? I say, we must extricate ourselves from spurious battles over identities that only generate negative emotional energy and violence and take us to darkness. Instead, let's move forward into economic realities that are staring in the face.

Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, writing to

an exemplar of a prosperous secular state.

This time, Sri Lankans go to polls to elect a new Parliament. The composition of Parliament is particularly important on this occasion because real power has now shifted to this institution of elected representatives.

Presidential absolutism is largely gone after the 19th Amendment and the gravitational force of power shifts towards the body of MPs and through them to the Prime Minister and cabinet over whom Parliament has ultimate control. The PM selects his Cabinet of Ministers. This is a



the Times of India in April this year, has pointed out how the Indian Constitution has defined India as a secular state. This is a recognition that ethnic and religious tensions can undermine a complex society. Secularism embraces universal human values linked to human existential issues. It works on a basic universal ethic: "Do to others as you want them to do to you." This maxim is natural to humans regardless of specific religious dogmas because it is based on a universal human endowment called empathy. We all have embedded in us this quality of empathy, which is adequate to live without even a religion. Religion divides whereas empathy unites.

Accordingly, under secularism the state and church are separate. Religion does not invade government and government does not invade religion. The two are apart. Swami Saraswathi further states that India has banished religion from state schools. Sri Lanka is behind India as our system hasn't divided church and state. Religious instruction is a must in our schools. Monks are playing too much of a meddling role in the affairs of state. This is plain nonsense.

Along with economic prosperity and the adoption of secularism, the potential for identity-based social and political conflagration will pale into insignificance. Much of identity tensions are rooted in poverty and scarcity and a public perception of lack of space for all. Bread and butter will supersede narrow versions of one's self. In the end, every citizen desires a shelter to live in, a meal at the table, a school for his children, medical attention when ill and the general space to enjoy life. Modernity is built on such foundational values.

Now, with the elections on, Sri Lanka has a glorious chance to decide whether to tread the modern path or to languish in misery brooding over whether one is a Sinhalese, Tamil, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian. All such identities are purely social constructions. Unless we reach to our common humanity we get nowhere. Voters must eschew leaders who are prone to be enemies of a secular state. Be sure, that this modernity in outlook is in fact inherent in Buddhist teaching. The regime of Buddhist Emperor Ashoka was

neat, sensible and accountable arrangement in constitution-making. Augurs well for a country that had been converted into a lawless state under a chief executive who had little respect for the constitution and other laws of the land.

This, alone, is considerable achievement by Yahapalanaya. Following the 19th Amendment, when the new Parliament is elected a Constitutional Council will be appointed and this vital institution will mother other independent commissions to look after the Public Service, the Judiciary, and Elections isolating the latter from dysfunctional political meddling. In the black days of Rajapaksa, politicisation of almost everything under the Sri Lankan sun deprived powerless people of their security, liberty and freedom to walk in dignity. Those like us who live in Australia and the West observe ordinary citizens enjoy such a quality of life. Surely, Sri Lankans deserve that! The strange thing is that we observe how bigmouths among the Australian and Western Sinhala Buddhist nationalists seem to suggest that Sri Lankans do not deserve such a quality of life; that the average man should continue to genuflect before lawless politicians in order to secure their needs.

I would have preferred had we been able to pass new electoral laws that would have served to fend off undesirable parasites enter Parliament through the list-choice of a party hierarchy. The present electoral system is stupid and has been the bane of our political culture. On the other hand, its replacement is a far more complicated measure that demands study and broad-based consultation for which time did not permit. The politically displaced seedy characters that hanged around the defeated President, in order to insure themselves against investigations into their corrupt deals have been so busy trying to sabotage the silent revolution of January 8th. Going much beyond the 100 days mandated for, would have brought in anarchy and triggered a counter-revolution.

That said and done, now the ball is in the electors' court and they must pick a stable government led by men and women who have had no corrupt narratives behind them.

We also need leaders with intelligence, education, experience and decency to steer the ship of state.

The fact is that the ship of state needs quick rectification from the damage it underwent under Rajapaksa rule. The country lies on the brink of a serious debt trap. This cannot be seriously addressed by a purely interim government of a hundred days. Our national income is hardly enough to repay and service the irresponsible levels of debt repayments

Poverty is rampant in the country and a record sixty per cent school drop-out rate reflects the inability of parents to support the education of their children. This is sad. Hospitals are starved of essential drugs and patients are thrown from pillar to post to get their medication at affordable prices.

Yahapalanaya thus far has largely restored the formal system of governance right. Now, we need a further stage of Yahapalanaya to deal with the components of good policy that



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built up over ten years. Chinese blokes simply kept on giving any money the government asked without any evaluation of feasible studies that normally precedes the granting of loans. On the other hand, Western aid adopts stringent methods of assessment. As a result, we have in our hands terrible White Elephants like the Rajapaksa International Airport in Mattala, the Rajapaksa Port at Hambantota, and the Rajapakse International Sports Stadium. Even the useful Highways that have been built have been done far above standard costs. Big commissions have been built into costs as a routine. Open robbing has been the name of the game and President Rajapaksa looked on winking himself away from the stories that reached his ears.

If one cared to read the Sunday Times economic column of respected economist Nimal Sanderatne one would have noted many dark trends. Our agriculture production has dropped. With the exception of tea, our coconut, rubber and minor export crops have all dropped alarmingly. Fishing has badly gone down. With the drastic decline in demand for our tea from Russia and the Middle East, our agricultural exports have dropped by as much as 6.5 per cent. The result of all this is that our trade balance has been in the red for many years since the last regime took over. Fortunately, our balance of payments have been salvaged largely by foreign remittances. Foreign remittances are essentially vulnerable and no economy can rely on that. Direct foreign investment, discouraged by threatening legislation, has been hovering around zero for many years.

Clearly the Sri Lankan economy is in peril. It follows that the living standard of our people is in danger.

Major structural changes in the agricultural, industrial and service sectors will have to be introduced and direct foreign investment must be encouraged into the country if we are to salvage the country and give a decent standard of living to the ordinary per-

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It seems almost self-evident that the historical role of completing the Yahapalanaya project and transforming Sri Lanka into a modern state has to be played by none other than Ranil Wickremesinghe and his United National Party. I cannot think of a single current Parliamentarian who can supersede Ranil in intellectual capacity, in emotional maturity, in experience and in integrity-qualities ideally needed for the demanding role. Looking back, one can credit Ranil Wickremesinghe as a leader who has waited patiently, marked his time, defended his party against all sorts of machinations played by the former Machiavellian President and bearing insults and humiliation from even his own party ranks that were obviously manipulated to discourage and oust him. "The wise man is unruffled by praise or blame," says the Dhammapada. So was Ranil. He was never shaken as he believed firmly in himself.

While Mahinda Rajapaksa was at his height Ranil confidently announced that the UNP will form a government in 2015. What a prophet! Credit backhandedly goes to Mahinda Rajapaksa for his political savviness in seeing in advance that Ranil was his only danger. Sensing that, he played a full card of tricks to get him out of the UNP. Mahinda set up UNP men to challenge him and employed media vilification. It is here that Ranil exemplified considerable emotional maturity-not to blow up but to hold his own. And he did. Doesn't he not deserve the Cup?

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